

How to Increase Student Motivation

By Thomas E. Scruggs and Margo A. Mastropieri

Because many students in special education have a history of school failure, they are at particular risk for low motivation and their desire to continue to strive for success is jeopardized. This may be particularly true in inclusive classrooms, where students with special needs may lag far behind their normally achieving peers in academic areas. However, you can take specific steps to help your students regain their motivation for academic success – and have fun doing it!

Preconditions for Improving Motivation

Before you can improve student motivation, you must meet several preconditions: a supportive, organized classroom environment; meaningful materials of an appropriate difficulty level; and task-oriented, rather than ego-oriented classrooms.

A supportive, organized classroom environment provides an ideal environment for teachers to use motivational strategies. A clearly organized classroom structure with consistent expectations helps students feel secure and decreases anxiety. Be as positive with students as possible, use statements that promote acceptance, and encourage and reward peers' positive support for each other. Survey students' feelings about being in your classroom, and attend to their suggestions for making it a more comfortable, safe environment.

A second important precondition is to ensure that the difficulty level of the materials and the pace of instruction are appropriate. It is difficult to motivate your students to learn when using materials that are too difficult or employed at an inappropriate instructional pace.

When your students' skill levels differ, use a variety of materials so that all students feel challenged but able to succeed. In addition to difficulty level, ensure the materials are meaningful to your students and that they reflect their backgrounds and interest.

Competitive environments, in which success is defined by outperforming other students, are not conducive to motivational strategies. Since most students with disabilities do not perform at the top of the class, many will not feel that they can succeed. Instead, create a "task-oriented" classroom environment in which all students strive to improve over their previous performance and in which effort and attention are encouraged and rewarded rather than performing better than others.

Motivational Strategies

The many techniques for improving motivation include improving self-efficacy, increasing personal investment in learning, making learning enjoyable, and using praise and rewards.

Increase Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is described as confidence in one's abilities to succeed. Students are more motivated to participate when they have a high degree of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy can be enhanced by structuring tasks that your students can complete with reasonable effort and a high rate of success. As your students increase their history of success, they will increase their desire to engage in new tasks. When you are presenting new tasks, remind your students of how successful they have been on similar tasks in the past.

State your confidence in your students' ability to succeed with statements such as, "I feel certain you can do this really well if you try hard." When your students succeed, remind them of your previous confidence in them. However, refrain from characterizing tasks as "easy," by saying, "You can do this, it's easy!" Little satisfaction can be obtained from succeeding at an "easy" task, and failing at an easy task can be humiliating. If a student who is successful characterizes the task as easy, you can say something like, "Well, maybe it was easy for you, because you knew the material so well, but I really don't think it was that easy."

Increase Personal Investment in Learning

Students are more motivated when their personal investment in learning is increased. One way of doing this is through goal-setting. Show your students examples of their previous work, and ask them to set a goal for their future performance. Students can set daily, weekly, or monthly goals for themselves. For example, they can set goals for how many math problems they can complete correctly in one period, how many words they can spell correctly on a weekly test, or their score on a unit test in history. Provide positive feedback when your students meet their goals, and encourage them to set higher goals for themselves in the future. Also, help your students monitor their own progress toward longer-term goals.

Attribution training is another way to help students increase their investment in their learning. Teach your students to attribute their successes to things they are in control of, such as effort, planning, or use of appropriate learning strategies. Enforce this thinking with statements such as, “The reason you did so well on that test is that you planned your time carefully and studied really hard!” Conversely, when students do not succeed, do not accept negative attributions such as “I’m stupid” or “It’s so hard”. Redirect learning failures to things under the students’ control, and encourage better efforts in the future.

Finally, you can increase your students’ investment in the classroom by increasing student decision-making in classroom procedures. Solicit your students’ suggestions for class rules, seating arrangements, or learning activities, and implement these suggestions whenever possible. Remind your students that many classroom procedures are included by their own suggestions.

Make Learning Fun

Students are more motivated to learn when classroom tasks are fun and enjoyable. Few things are less motivating than a seemingly endless stack of worksheets, to be replaced by even more worksheets. Use materials that are concrete, meaningful, and relevant to your students’ lives. Develop activities that are fun for students, and allow them to actively participate in the concepts being learned. When drill is necessary, as in some basic skills areas, provide fast-paced, high-energy activities in which success rates are high, students are rewarded for learning, and activities are conducted within discrete time intervals.

Other ways to make learning fun and enjoyable include providing variety in class activities, through, for example, difference media, guest speakers, student presentation, and computer applications. Create variety in homework assignments, and employ a variety of group and individual activities.

Develop classroom activities in game-like formats. Competition that pits student against student can be counterproductive to a classroom environment, but activities in which any student has a good chance of winning can be very motivating. Activities in which groups compete (e.g., questions

about the current science chapter), and in which group membership changes frequently, can be particularly enjoyable for your students.

Finally, make learning enjoyable by teaching enthusiastically. You can do this by increasing inflections in your speaking, using dramatic body movements and physical gestures, employing animated and emotive facial expressions, using a varied choice of words, and actively accepting student ideas or suggestions. Overall, a demonstration of a high energy level promotes enthusiasm. When teachers teach with enthusiasm, students are more motivated to learn.

Use Praise and Rewards

We saved praise and rewards until last because it is usually the first thing teachers think about when trying to increase motivation. Nevertheless, it is true that students are more motivated to learn when they think they will be rewarded for their efforts. Be generous with praise and positive feedback; most of us receive too little praise rather than too much. Be sure to link praise to specific criteria students have met, and link it to positive attributions such as effective study strategies and extra effort. Instill in your students a sense of personal satisfaction with statements such as, “This is your best effort yet! You should be very proud of this paper!” Inform parents of particularly noteworthy student efforts.

More tangible rewards also can promote motivation in your students. When using more tangible rewards, such as redeemable tokens, stickers, or special privileges, be sure to set up conditions for the rewards, include specific performance criteria, and pair rewards with positive attributions. Be careful not to provide tangible rewards more than necessary, and be sure external rewards do not take the place of the personal satisfaction students should feel in doing a job well. As with all motivational strategies, collect evidence that your efforts are yielding positive results.

Motivation may be the most important single characteristic to promote in students to help ensure their long-term success. Motivated students are generally successful students, and it is worth our own best efforts to bring out the best efforts of our students!